Chairman's report Ian Black

Is there light at the end of the tunnel or is the tunnel getting longer?

Are we getting used to all the new uses for old phrases or the invention of new concepts to match the current Covid-19 pandemic? So much has been negative – Lockdown, Distancing, Cancellation and oh so many more. I hope that you have been able to manage all the twists, turns and government edicts and kept yourselves and your families well.

Sadly, as far as the AGS and the Norfolk Group, in particular, are concerned, the main issue has been Cancellations. The frustrations associated with our very special interests must be immense – growing, nurturing and tending plants for shows which have been cancelled. At a local level we've lost our own show in March, the East Anglia Show in May and, of course, all our meetings. Even as I write this article, the AGS has all Shows listed as cancelled and has recommended that all Local Group meetings remain suspended "until further notice". The Norfolk Group can do no more than comply with the recommendations. Contact with the Hethersett Village Hall has provided no guidance as to when and how they might manage future bookings and what the consequent impact will be on the way our group responds. Our planned visit, in July to, Hoecroft Garden is also cancelled

So far, so very negative but how has the Society and our Local Group attempted to introduce some positivity? For some of you, this section may also cause further frustrations, given that much of the answer to that question has been based on technology. I apologise to you, therefore, if you don't embrace the internet and online technology as this is where so much is happening.

From early in the year, our own AGS Norfolk website has been publishing a splendid array of photographs of gardens and pot-grown alpines, for which we must thank all who have contributed and Peter Lyle for popping them onto the site. There have been online lectures using the now ever-present Zoom (other group technology is available). Several of us enjoyed the talk by David Morris of the RSPB called Restoring Native Alpines about the re-introduction and management of alpine species in the upland areas of the Lake District. If you'd still like to watch it, you can view it on the the AGS Facebook page at: https://www.facebook.com/groups/alpinegardensociety/?post_id=1676604295820172.

Your Committee has also employed meetings technology (Zoom) in order to run a virtual meeting. As you can imagine, we were able to reach very few firm decisions. We are intent in our aim to re-start meetings when conditions allow. We have, clearly, lost several of this year's programmed speakers but we are targeting the potential to 'roll over' the 2020 programme into next year. We are still hoping that our planned Norman Read Memorial Lecture with Razvan Chisu will go ahead at

2.00pm, Saturday 25th September 2021. We are going to explore the potential for running a Group meeting online. There's more to this than just setting up the meeting, we need also to get the help and co-operation of our lecturers. Diane Blyth has already asked for feedback on whether you are interested in being involved in such a meeting. Please, if you haven't already, let Diane know your thoughts on 'attending' an internet-based meeting: dianenblyth@gmail.com.

On balance, having read this, is there a glimmer of light or is the tunnel getting longer? Perhaps there's just a bend in the tunnel and the light will be with us sooner than we think. I tend towards the optimistic view and I hope that you do too.

Stay Safe, Keep Well and continue to enjoy the world of gardening and wildlife which so many have embraced over the past 100+ days.

Summer Alpines Richard Hobbs

Good garden alpines for summer are rather less plentiful than spring flowerers so here are three suggestions from our garden:

Now that the bulbs have largely finished flowering and the crocus foliage has died down, we can really appreciate some summer flowering gems. *Geranium glaberrimum*, from high altitudes in South Western Turkey, where it grows in cracks in rocks, will grace any alpine garden with its soft pink flowers and dark red filaments. In our garden it reaches 20 cms in a well-drained position. Like its close relative G. *macrorhizum* it has rather smelly leaves but fortunately G. *glaberrimum* does not run around all over the place. In fact, it's just the opposite being rather slow and clump forming. Vegetative propagation is difficult as unlike many of its relatives you can't just yank bits off. The flowers are just under 2 cms and go on for months. It needs full sun.

Another delightful plant with some unruly relatives is *Allium acuminatum*. There is no need to worry about this becoming a nuisance. It grows in rather loose stony soils in Western North America on the edge of scrub and woodland. It will tolerate some shade but its essential requirement is good drainage. In our garden it is about 15 cms tall and the deepest bright pink. Its vernacular name is the Taper Tip onion and the glossy tepals terminate in a long drawn out point. It is very unusual and lovely and makes an excellent garden plant. It does appear on the show bench from time to time. The foliage has largely gone by flowering time and is not messy. Our plants were grown from seed and flowered in their third year thanks to advice given to me by the late Mike Smith many years ago. As soon as bulb seedlings straighten up stop 'watering' and feed with a high potash fertilizer at half strength such as Tomorite.

Some plants are easy to place into a family with a quick look but some are at first are rather baffling. One such plant is the small sub-shrub *Petrophyton caespitosa*. At first glance it looks like a saxifrage but is in fact in the Rosaceae family. It is a low hummock-forming evergreen plant with finely divided dark green foliage resembling a mossy saxifrage. It is a North American mountain plant of rock crevices in Pine and Juniper forests in the rain shadow. It is fairly slow growing reaching about 20 cms across in 10 years. The creamy-white rather fluffy looking flowers are held above the foliage on short densely packed racemes. We grow it in part shade in a well-drained spot.

Building a Crevice Garden

Phil Blyth

It seems to me that crevice gardens add a different dimension to the traditional form of rock garden, but in East Anglia, where the natural stone is flint, it would be quite costly to bring in the sort of red sandstone that is used in the AGS garden in Pershore or the very deeply set stone as used in the Wisley Garden crevice garden would be far beyond anything I could afford.

Lamium sandvasicum

So the first consideration for me was how to cut the cost. How could I achieve the visual effect of the larger crevice gardens, without the cost. Obviously, this would mean buying in as little rock as I could get away with. After looking around for some time I found that I could buy walling stone relatively cheaply from a firm called Yorkstone Supplies, ordered online. After all, visually a crevice garden is more or less a dry stone wall laid on its side - it has the necessary gaps between the rocks for planting. The rock would not be set very deeply in the soil, but the cost was affordable so I rang the company to ask about the stone they supplied. Was it sandstone, gritstone or limestone? The guy had no idea what he was selling, but from what he told me it sounded like sandstone, and he assured me that I would be able to split the rock along the lines that you get in sedimentary rock.

From the information on the Yorkstone website one tonne of stone would make about 1.5 square metres of wall. If I laid the stone with about 1" spacing between rocks I should finish up with about 2 square metres of crevice garden. The order for one tonne of rock was placed - it arrived on a pallet.

I had a long unfinished raised bed which had never been planted, so this was to be the site of the crevice garden. Size 6 x 12 feet, about 2 feet high. It is very necessary to eliminate all perennial weeds and all persistent cultivated plants from the site before laying down the rock, otherwise they would grow up from under the rock and be near impossible to remove. So we did this over a period of about 18 months, constantly weeding anything that grew. A very persistent allium proved the most difficult problem. It made rice bulbils in its first year from seedlings, but we beat it in the end. The bottom of the raised bed is lined with polythene, and the bed filled. I mixed a huge amount of sharp sand and some used potting soil which includes a high proportion of grit. Only about 25% is garden soil, and most of that is at the bottom. A very sandy mix at the top.

Armeria juniperifolia
'Bevans variety'

So the work began to lay the rock in place. I had asked Yorkstone to provide rock no more than 2" thick, to save me having to spend many hours with hammer and bolster chisel. Because I was building the garden on a raised wall I secured the perimeter rocks with a coloured cement. The rock in each row is more or less the same width along its length, but the width of rock in each row varies. Because of the economy described earlier, the rock is only 6" to 9" deep, but it looked okay, and when plants grow over it serves the purpose well enough.

I filled between the rocks just enough to hold the rock in place. The crevices were filled completely with the same very sandy mix as we planted, and topped with 6mm stone from Earsham Gravels. I took a tip from Peter Korn and washed much of the root ball off the plant as we planted - this helps

to get the plant into the narrow space between the rocks.

Daphne hendersonii
'Ernst Hauser'

Needless to say I underestimated the amount of rock needed. The first tonne did just over half the job, so a second tonne was ordered, but I forgot to mention the preferred 2" width. This made a lot of work with the chisel, but I got the job done, and the second tonne produced a lot more rock than the first, so the plan is to make another crevice at ground level with the remainder.

We were pleased with the visual effect, and with the way plants grew. The rock sets off the plants well. We had our failures, and *Penstemon campanulatus* grew well for a couple of years, then died, which was a disappointment. However, *Potentilla pulvinaris* grew far better than elsewhere in the garden and became too big for the space I had allowed it. (Had to take some of it out). As has *Hypericum olympicum* (grown from seed) - its far too big really but I think I will cut it down to its base and hope it grows less vigorously in future. A *Daphne calcicola* is doing well. Several dianthus put on a good display last summer, and will need to be contained within their allotted space. *Gentian acaulis* group are difficult for us, and they take time to settle in, but they are looking promising for now. *Zauschneria* 'Pumilio' was a good trailing plant throughout last Summer with its showy bright red tubular flowers. We are particularly pleased with the success of porphyrion section saxifrages and the hybrids, and silver saxifrages are fairly easy. Several L*ewisia cotyledons* have survived a couple of winters.

Daphne calcicola and phlox

We are still planting as and when we find the right sort of plant - nothing too rampant otherwise they tend to dominate. All-in-all it is interesting to see how plants respond differently given different growing condition and it has increased the range of plants that we can grow. I suspect it is mainly down to the large amount of sharp sand incorporated into the soil. Can we use this in other parts of the garden?

Photos: Diane Blyth

The Weird and Wonderful World of Aroids Ray Mitchell

In December, at our group Christmas social, David and Brian gave us an excellent presentation with some smashing photo's of Scottish gardens they had visited. Among the wonderful rhododendrons and other very colourful plants were several groups of aroids (Araceae).

Putting it very basically, Araceae 'flowers' consist of a spathe and a spadix, the spathe is a hood like structure, when it opens it reveals the spadix, a long protuberance at the base of which are the true flowers which are mostly tiny. Usually moths, beetles or flies are attracted to the sometimes very bad smell, depending on species, imitating rotten meat. Eventually, after pollination, a stem of usually red when ripe, berries appear making another attraction in the flower border, we grow quite a few different species and cultivars here.

First to show are the arum leaves, before the spathe, there are quite a few modern cultivars with very prettily marked leaves, some marbled, spotted, almost white and the basic green of our wild 'cuckoo pint or lords and ladies'. The spathe on arums is usually pale green but depending on species it can be yellow, brown or almost red/black, once again some with lovely markings, the spadix follows the same colouration.

Arum creticum

Dracunculus vulgaris

Dracunculus vulgaris, also known as the 'Voodoo lily' is my favourite of all the aroids growing to about 120 cms, the very exotic looking leaves appear first but then the spathe starts to loom looking like a very alien being. This carries on growing to about 40 to 50 cms opening up to reveal a dark blood red interior and spadix, the smell is unbelievably of rotting flesh so don't plant it near the house or a seating area.

There is another Dracunculus, *D. muscivorus*, now *Helicodiceros muscivorus*, this is just as spectacular, far more smelly, sometimes known as the dead horse arum, but less easy to find and grow. When the spathe opens it's a dirty brown/pink/green mix inside and covered in coarse hairs as is the spadix, resembling the tail of a rat diving down, this one is not hardy but not recommended for a normal greenhouse, worth growing for its leaves though.

On the rodent theme *Arisarum proboscidium* is a small aroid, leaves at first like a small hosta, followed by the white and dark brown/purple, almost black spathe, this gives the impression of small creatures trying to hide in the leaves. When my grandchildren were small they were really fascinated by the 'mice', trying to hide and thought this is where baby mice came from, hence the common name of mouse plant.

Arisaema candidissimum

The most varied in shape, size and colour of all the aroids are the Arisaemas, the hardier Western ones are known as 'Jack-in-the-pulpit' whereas the Asian plants are known as 'Whipcord Cobra' lilies. My favourite of the hardy ones is *A. candidissimum*, the spathe appears first, this is usually pink and white striped and a beautiful shape but I have had a form that was green and white, sadly now departed! When this is finished the leaves appear and once again they are so very exotic looking.

A Japanese species, *Arisaema sikokianum* seems to be quite hardy with us, we have been told you need two different clones to get seed but as it was really expensive we will have to wait for its partner until I am allowed more pocket money. The spathe is really dark purple striped, almost black, with a pure white inner and the spadix resembling a button, very fascinating.

Arisaema flavum is an odd one in my opinion, some forms only about 10 cms high but others 50cms or more, the small spathe (in comparison with other Arisaemas), is usually bright yellow, sometimes dark brown. No matter how tall or big the plant is, the spathe doesn't seem to vary in size, always small, as is the spadix.

My last aroid is the Pinellia, *P. pedatisecta* is a quiet green plant, the leaves are in multi sections and held horizontally, the spathe is similar in all but one of the species, rarely does it open completely and the berries/seed stay green/white but the spadix carries on growing through the end of the spathe. The one that differs has dark green, variegated, low growing leaves, ours died before it produced a spathe so I can't tell you about that. One to avoid is *P. ternata*, I am told as it can become invasive, I have to say I haven't found this so.

Pinellia pedatisecta

We grow a lot more aroids than this and we recommend them a lot, first, the highly decorative leaves, then the spathe and spadix, always a good talking point with visitors, then the beautiful stems of seeds, don't forget the AGS seed exchange. Most grow easily from seed, ours seem to do better in semi shade but we are experimenting with spare plants in real shade and open sunny areas as long as lots of humus can be added. We usually have spare plants or seeds, please just ask.

Photos: Coral Mitchell & David King

Bulb Sale

Gable House
Redisham, Beccles,
NR34 8NE

Sunday 6th September 2020

11am - 5pm

Autumn Bulbs & Perennials

free entry.

Sanitisers available.

No refreshments and no facilities.

This goes ahead depending on circumstances at the time